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SUBJECT: SANADER'S BELGRADE VISIT HAILED AS HISTORIC,
COURAGEOUS

Classified By: Political Officer Tom Selinger for reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

11. (U) SUMMARY AND COMMENT: Politicians and analysts from across nearly the entire political spectrum have praised PM Ivo Sanader's November 15 visit to Belgrade and his meetings with SAM President Svetozar Marovic and PM Vojislav Kostunica as a key step forward in post-war reconciliation. According to the MFA, concrete results from this visit include an agreement on the protection of minority rights (septel) and a joint statement recognizing the two countries' shared goal of Euro-Atlantic integration and highlighting the importance of regional cooperation. In Croatian political circles, the substance of the trip is far outweighed by the magnitude of the visit itself, the first of a Croatian head of government to the SAM capital.

12. (C) The visit is also a reassuring sign of Sanader's control over the right wing of his party, particularly in the run-up to presidential elections expected in early January. The PM continues to succeed in his pro-integration and pro-reconciliation foreign policy, keeping the ruling Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) squarely in line with the expectations of the international community. Only the far right Croatian Party of Rights (HSP) opposed the Belgrade trip, saying it was poorly timed, three days before the anniversary of the fall of Vukovar. END SUMMARY AND COMMENT.

DOCUMENTS HIGHLIGHT COMMON EUROPEAN GOALS

13. (U) In a now familiar refrain, Damir Kusen, Assistant Minister in the MFA for EU, NATO and member states, told the DCM that both sides were committed to addressing their differences in a "European spirit." Kusen said during the visit the GoC announced its intention to withdraw all military forces from along the SAM border by the end of 2004, and hoped their neighbors would reciprocate. The GoC will also extend its visa exemption for SAM citizens by 6 months, with the possibility of making the policy permanent (presumably after the border is completely de-militarized). SAM's deliverables, according to Kusen, included support for Croatia's bid for a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council, and the return of land registries and books from a monastic library taken by the JNA during the war. The GoC hopes to focus an expected Kostunica visit to Zagreb in the spring on trade and economic cooperation.

14. (U) Minority issues dominated much of the visit. MOJ Vesna Skare-Ozbolt signed an agreement on the protection of national minorities with the SAM Minister of Human and Minority Rights Rasim Ljajic. Kusen emphasized that the GoC sees the final phase of refugee returns as a bilateral issue with SAM, and hopes to speed up the resolution of missing persons cases. Kusen noted that the GoC's budgetary challenges will temporarily delay resolution of the return of property to Serbs, but said SAM officials understand this. Several days before the Belgrade visit, according to Kusen, the GoC provided the Serbian government with a much-publicized list of war crimes indictments (a version of which has since appeared on the internet) in an effort to address concerns that fear of arrest prevents some Serb refugees from returning.

MINORITIES AND OPPOSITION AGREE ON SIGNIFICANCE OF VISIT

15. (C) SAM Ambassador to Croatia Milan Simurdic, who accompanied Sanader on the entire Belgrade visit, called it truly historic. He told the DCM that the Serb minority in Croatia was very satisfied with Sanader's decision to make the trip and he viewed it as very productive.

16. (C) Furio Radin, an Italian minority MP who chairs the Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights and Rights of National Minorities, told PolOff that PM's visit was "necessary and courageous, particularly just before the presidential elections." Radin praised Sanader's foreign policy, calling it the best part of the current government. He noted that the real proof of the PM's success was his

support among minority MPs, and all have praised his Belgrade visit.

17. (C) Professor Damir Grubisa, a left-wing political scientist who left the Tudjman government in protest over its expansionist policy toward Bosnia, said the visit shows that Croatia and SAM are pushing the war into the past. Grubisa, who does not often agree with the PM, called Sanader a "shrewd statesman," and commended his "business-like approach" to regional relations. The Belgrade visit, Grubisa told PolOff, showed real leadership on Sanader's part and

will open a dialogue that will make all future cooperation easier.

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